

**Testimony of Victor Joseph, President and Chairman
Tanana Chiefs Conference
Before the House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2018 Budget
May 16, 2017**

Good afternoon Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Victor Joseph and I serve as the President and Chairman of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC). Thank you for inviting me to present testimony regarding TCC's priorities for Fiscal Year 2018 concerning appropriations for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Indian Health Service (IHS). We are grateful for this Subcommittee's bipartisanship – reflected as recently as the final FY 2017 appropriations measure – and for the positive results the Subcommittee has made possible in Alaska Native villages and throughout Indian country.

TCC is a non-profit intertribal consortium of 39 federally-recognized Indian tribes and 41 communities located across Alaska's interior. TCC serves approximately 13,000 Alaska Natives in Fairbanks where TCC headquarters is located and in the rural villages in Alaska's vast interior, strung along the 1,400 mile Yukon River and its tributaries. Our service area encompasses 235,000 square miles, about the size of Texas. Our most eastern village is Eagle, about four miles from the Canadian border. Our most western village is Anvik, about 60 miles from the Bering Sea. Our 41 constituent villages are remote and they must overcome many challenges to build and sustain healthy communities. This Subcommittee understands the critical element necessary to promote healthy communities and sustainable economies; community stability. With community stability, good results follow, like reduced crime, healthier families, better educated children, infrastructure and economic opportunity.

Today, I will focus on four areas important to the tribal leadership and the tribal communities TCC serves:

1. Improve tribal health care quality and access;
2. Expand public safety, Tribal court and realty services;
3. Help Alaska Natives carry out sustainable fish management practices;
4. Promote economic development and job creation in rural Alaska villages.

While TCC appreciates President Trump's recognition of the opioid epidemic and the need for public safety in his FY 2018 "America First" Budget Blueprint, we cannot agree with his request to reduce spending for non-defense programs, including a proposed 12% cut of \$1.5 billion for the Department of the Interior and a 16% cut of \$12.6 billion for the Department of Health and Human Services.

This Subcommittee has worked diligently, year after year, to increase funding in such critical areas as tribal health, public safety, Contract Support Costs, education and construction in recognition of unmet tribal needs and the resulting challenges tribal communities face. We are very concerned that cuts to these programs may be combined with the loss of tens of millions in grants and awards to tribes from HUD, USDA, DOJ and Education; grants that help us carry out our BIA- and IHS-funded programs. For rural interior Alaska Native communities, facing a State budget deficit for FY 2018, federal appropriations often make the difference between the success and failure of our efforts and, in turn, the wellness of our tribal members.

1. Improve Tribal Health Care Quality and Access (IHS)

Increase IHS Services Budget. TCC greatly appreciates the \$232 million increase Congress included in the FY 2017 budget for the Indian Health Service, especially the increases of \$78 million for Hospitals and Clinics programs, \$14 million for Purchased/Referred Care (P/RC), \$13 million for Alcohol and Substance Abuse, \$12 million for Mental Health, full reimbursement of Contract Support Costs (adding \$80 million), and \$22 million increase for IHS Facilities needs for a combined appropriation of \$5.04 billion for FY 2017. Purchased/Referred Care (P/RC) funds are especially critical to us. We seek an increase for FY 2018 of \$34 million. TCC is one of the only tribal health entities in Alaska that does not have a regional hospital. Therefore, we rely heavily on P/RC funds to ensure that our patients receive comprehensive health services when we refer them to third-party service providers paid for with P/RC funds. For FY 2018, we also request increases of \$17 million for Mental Health, \$15 million for Alcohol and Substance Abuse, and \$5 million for Dental Health above the FY 2017 enacted amount.

TCC remains deeply appreciative of the Subcommittee's creative solution to the contract support cost problem to achieve full funding without jeopardizing program funding. We respectfully urge the Subcommittee to continue with its current approach of employing a separate and indefinite appropriation. At the same time, we believe each agency should add two FTEs to manage the CSC account, engage with Tribes and provide robust analysis. IHS's error in estimating 2016 and 2017 CSC requirements must not be repeated. Errors of that magnitude have direct consequences on the Subcommittee's ability to appropriate funds that IHS, tribes and tribal organizations, such as TCC, require for the delivery of health care services.

Increase Budget for the Small Ambulatory Program (SAP) and IHS' 105(l) Leasing Program. We appreciate the appropriation of \$5 million for the Small Ambulatory Program (SAP) for FY 2017. We ask the Subcommittee to double this figure for FY 2018 so that an additional 5-8 tribes can construct small ambulatory health clinics in their communities. For our remote Native villages, a hub clinic is sometimes hundreds of miles away from a patient. Too often, patients must be transported by medivac at great cost. Village clinics play an integral role in providing routine health care as well as life saving emergency services. In addition, we request the Subcommittee to direct the IHS, in report language, to explore whether a small clinic should be built in one of our Native villages. Relatedly, a number of Tribes have approached IHS to negotiate leases under section 105(l) of the Act for the use of Tribal buildings where IHS programs are carried out, but IHS correctly points out that there is no budget yet to pay such leases. We appreciate the \$11 million provided for tribally leased facilities in FY 2017 (which includes \$2 million from Direct Operations), but we understand these funds were intended to bring the Village Built Clinic (VBC) lease amounts closer to the actual cost of operating these facilities. Thus any 105(l) leases funded out of these increases only serve to ensure the VBC lease amounts continue to be deficient. We therefore believe it is critical that agency 105(l) lease payments not come out of program funds. We request the Subcommittee to create a new account to pay required 105(l) tribal lease payments within the Direct Operations budget.

Increase funding for the IHS Domestic Violence Prevention Program (DVPP). We greatly appreciate Congress including a \$4 million increase for the Domestic Violence Prevention Program (DVPP) for FY 2017. This increase will fund an additional 30 IHS, Tribal and urban Indian organizations (averaging \$133,000/award). As the CDC has noted, one out of every two AI/AN woman will experience domestic violence and one out of every three AI/AN women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. The DVPP provides culturally appropriate domestic violence and sexual assault prevention and intervention resources to tribal communities. It is well documented that women in Alaska's rural villages report rates of domestic violence that are 10 times higher than the rest of the country. We urge the Subcommittee to support and expand this successful and needed program in FY 2018.

2. Expand public safety, Tribal court and realty services in interior Alaska

TCC cannot stress enough the importance our Native village leaders place on providing their communities with the resources they require to supplement limited public safety services. As a Public Law 280 State, the State of Alaska has jurisdiction over crimes in Native American communities. The BIA, with limited law enforcement funds, prioritizes public safety funds in non P.L. 280 States in the incorrect assumption that Pub. L. 280 States are investing the resources and personnel required to ensure public safety and law enforcement in Native and rural communities. This is not the case. The Alaska Department of Public Safety is stretched thin and too few State troopers make routine patrols in Native communities. TCC has limited recurring funds to pay for our Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program which works in conjunction with Alaska State Troopers. Our VPSOs are the “First Responders in the Last Frontier” and they respond to emergency calls, fire, EMS and search and rescue.

Due to limited BIA public safety funds, the role of Tribal Courts in Alaska Native villages is critical. It allows our villages to address public safety concerns at the community level – in a culturally appropriate way – that is more responsive to, and respectful of, local tribal concerns. It seeks to heal and end criminal activity through a holistic approach, rather than through arrest, prosecution and incarceration, which perpetuates criminal and anti-social behavior and recidivism among Alaska Natives. We urge the Subcommittee to include an additional \$10 million in FY 2018, within BIA’s Public Safety and Justice account for Tribal Courts (TPA) funding, and include report language that the increase should be used by BIA in Pub. L. 280 States, like Alaska.

Currently there is a proposed \$4.3 million dollar cut in BIA Real Estate and Trust Services Funding. We adamantly oppose any cuts to this funding. The money used to compact real estate services with Tanana Chiefs and other tribal providers of real estate and trust services is administered with an efficiency that could never be matched. We have a realty and probate staff of only five people who manage a land area larger than most of the states in the union. They serve nearly 7,000 landowning clients, many thousands of acres, and oversee a long list of services from federal probate to transactional real estate to trespass investigation. This week we have one staff member more than one hundred miles from the nearest community, traveling a dozen of these miles on foot, investigating the ongoing theft of resources from a 160 acre Native Allotment, another employee supplying landowner information to the Bureau of Land Management as a wildfire spreads, and yet another taking a witness statement from a 96 year old client in the hospital. That is the snapshot of a moment in this department where virtually all services related to land ownership, transfer, development, and protection are overseen by a handful of dedicated professionals with limited funding. We currently have a backlog of over 300 cases and as the original tribal landowners age and pass away, they leave in their wake a rapidly increasing client base adding to the growing pile. Continued fractionation of land ownership means that the number of people dependent on our services increases with each passing year. Meanwhile, the funding stays stagnant. We have responded to growing numbers by taking on incredible workloads. These programs cannot withstand funding cuts, and in fact, funding should reflect the increasing population of clients. Please add \$8 million to this account in FY 2018.

3. Help Alaska Natives carry out sustainable fish management practices

It is the priority of every Alaska Native to continue traditional hunting and fishing practices which promote the social, cultural and spiritual wellness of our people. I want to share a success story that was borne out of tribal sacrifice. It concerns Chinook Salmon (King Salmon) management along the Yukon River and tributaries where our Native villages are located. During the 1990s, the average run of King Salmon in the Yukon River was just below 300,000 fish. Runs began to decline in the 2000s. In 2013, the run plummeted to a record low 60,000 fish. The Native Alaska villages along the Yukon knew that it would fall to them to make sacrifices. In 2014, the Native villages of the Yukon River came together in St. Mary’s, Alaska and for future generations

imposed a fish moratorium on King Salmon. In 2015, we met again at Tanana and agreed to further conservation efforts and continued the moratorium. The villages also formed the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (YRITFC), which TCC supports.

The self-imposed moratorium left tribal members with little to no traditional King Salmon harvest. Due to their sacrifice, for the first time in over a decade, the United States met its escapement goal to Canada for King Salmon in 2014, and then exceeded their escapement goal in 2015, all to ensure the continued existence of the King Salmon in the Yukon River. In 2015, the run had rebounded to about 150,000 King Salmon. The sacrifice hurt tribal members who depend on King Salmon for their subsistence. Forgoing fish camps in 2014 and 2015 was extremely difficult and a financial hardship on our members. It also harmed us culturally, for it is in fish camps that Alaska Native youth learn math, science, spirituality and how to fish from their elders. I cannot express how difficult a sacrifice this was for our members.

On July 17, 2016, Alaska Lt. Governor Byron Mallott, Alaska Fish & Game Commissioner, Sam Cotton, and Rural Affairs Director, Albert Kookesh, joined TCC officials and myself on a four-day trip to tour interior villages on the Yukon River and listen to community members to get a better understanding of how to improve the management of the Chinook run. I noted to the Alaska State officials who accompanied us on our tour to fish camps and the villages of Tanana, Rampart, Stevens Village, Beaver, Fort Yukon, Circle and Eagle, that the tribal members always fed us fish. Even though they had little to share, they gave us their best. Now, I ask you to do your best; honor the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission – and the Alaska Native stakeholders – in their efforts to save Yukon’s King Salmon by increasing BIA’s Tribal Management/Development Program in FY 2018 to \$14.266 million, and direct that half of that increase address subsistence management in Alaska by *tribal entities* like the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. Please sustain this effort for the next few years so that the Commission can ensure the viability of King Salmon in the Yukon River and our traditional subsistence practices. Alaska’s interior, like the coast, is under environmental threat from floods, bank erosion and wildfires. The Commission has demonstrated that it stands shoulder to shoulder with State of Alaska and Federal fish management officials as a capable steward.

4. Promote economic development and job creation in rural Alaska villages

In 2016, through various support programs, we assisted nearly 200 tribal members in Fairbanks and in our Native villages with CDL classes, employment training in facility maintenance, flooring and cabinet installation, plumbing, plastic and cooper pipe fitting, wildland firefighting training, and cooking. We provided over 2,000 bus token to nearly 750 interior tribal members in the city of Fairbanks who were searching for work, and gave nearly 2,000 free computer lab sessions to employment seekers. These are small, but helpful measures, and we ask this Subcommittee to increase resources for BIA job training and retraining programs, and adult education programs in FY 2018. There is great dignity in learning a trade and providing for your family. Such investments yield tremendous returns by allowing our members to compete more effectively for jobs. Please increase the budget to help promote job creation in our rural Native villages, where work is seasonal and unemployment remains high. Our current resources are simply inadequate to the task at hand. Ana Basee.